

South Dakota National Guard

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Women reflect on changing roles, opportunities in SD Air Guard

By Senior Master Sgt. Nancy Ausland
114th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. – For more than 40 years, women have played an important role in the South Dakota Air National Guard. Many of the women who joined in the early years of the organization made great strides alongside their male counterparts to prove themselves as capable, confident and leading members.

From firefighters to fighter pilots, these women challenged the stereotypes and redefined what it means to be a woman in today's Air Force.

It began with the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948, which granted women permanent status in the regular and Reserve forces of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps, as well as in the newly created Air Force.

It wasn't until 1972 that the South Dakota Air National Guard enlisted its first women in the unit. Mary De Jong, Ranae Burgers and Joan Egge were among the first female members.

Women were allowed to enlist in administration, base operations, maintenance, law enforcement and the medical field. From that point on, although still a minority, women have served in all aspects of operations for the unit.

One such woman was retired Master Sgt. Debra Tunge, who enlisted in the 114th Law Enforcement Squadron and later served as a member of the 114th Security Police Squadron. Tunge saw a lot of changes over the years and was a key female member of this male dominated career field.

"When I joined in 1976, I felt like the men accepted me, but I also felt like I always needed to prove myself," said Tunge, who worked fulltime in the unit and retired in 2012 with over 35 years of service.

Retired Col. Ruth Christopherson also broke new ground within the unit as the first woman to reach the rank of colonel.

"I kind of joined the unit in 1978 on a whim," said Christopherson. "I had no aspirations that I would still be there 30 years later."

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Christopherson was the first woman to receive a command position within the unit, and was also the first and only woman to be assigned as the chief of staff for the headquarters of the South Dakota Air National Guard.

“I was honored to be a colonel, and I would say the main reason I made it to that position was because of the people that I worked with over the years,” said Christopherson. “I had great mentors and they helped me to reach my goals.”

Christopherson retired in 2008 with 30 plus years of service and served as both an enlisted member and an officer with the 114th Fighter Wing.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the 114th Fighter Wing saw an increase in women joining. Some joined for the education benefits, others for a sense of family that the unit offered.

“My dad and my brother were members of the unit, so that made it an easier decision for me when I joined in 1990,” said Master Sgt. Kim Motley, 114th Maintenance Group personnel specialist. “Our unit has always been one big family, figuratively, and in some cases, literally. I like that about the 114th.”

Master Sgt. Lori Hoop, 114th Communication Flight information management manager, says the roles of women in the unit have changed over the years, partially due to technological changes.

“I can remember the first computers that we had on base with the five-inch disk drives and how impressed we were with them,” said Hoop, who enlisted in 1981 as a ground radio operator. “They were quite a step up from the typewriters we used to use to accomplish our jobs.”

As new job opportunities arose and equipment advanced, more and more women were stepping in to other challenging career fields.

In 1994, the Air Force Reserve got its first woman fighter pilot. In 2012, the 114th Fighter Wing also commissioned its first two female F-16 pilots. Later that same year, the 114th received its first female firefighter.

“Women of the South Dakota Air National Guard will continue to strive to be the best and the first to accomplish greatness in a unit that has always seen the potential and equality of women members,” said Christopherson.

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High resolution photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/southdakotationalguard



831101-Z-ZZ999-001: South Dakota Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Debra Tunge waits on a customer in the pass and ID section of the 114th Weapons Systems Security Flight at Joe Foss Field, S.D., in November of 1983. (U.S. Air National Guard photo/Released)



130407-Z-TF102-073: Lt. Col. Edwin Vanderwolde, 114th Support Group commander hands Lt. Col. Mary Rysavy, 114th Logistics Readiness Squadron commander, the unit's flag during a change of command ceremony at Joe Foss Field, S.D., April 6, 2013. Rysavy is one of many South Dakota Air National Guard women who are rising to senior leadership positions within the organization. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Christopher Stewart/Released)



140619-Z-SJ722-049: Senior Airman Angela Schuster, a firefighter with the 114th Civil Engineer Squadron, gears up for a training exercise at Joe Foss Field, S.D., during live-fire drills June 19, 2014. Schuster was the first woman to enlist in the South Dakota Air National Guard as a firefighter in September 2012. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Airman Duane Duimstra/Released)



140818-Z-XX999-001: Master Sgt. Jessica Meyers, 114th Maintenance Group munitions handler, oversees operations during a contingency deployment Aug. 18, 2014. Meyers joins several other women who have chosen to serve in such non-traditional roles as a munitions technician in the South Dakota Air National Guard. (U.S. Air National Guard photo/Released)

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